

TITLE: BOOK REVIEW: The Affair-the Case of Alfred Dreyfus

REVIEWER: John T. Kirby

VOLUME: 31 ISSUE: Spring YEAR: 1987

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.



All statements of fact, opinion or analysis expressed in Studies in Intelligence are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or views of the Central Intelligence Agency or any other US Government entity, past or present. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying US Government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

Book Reviews

The Affair—the Case of Alfred Dreyfus. By Jean-Denis Bardin. George Braziller, Inc., New York; 1986; 628 pp.

The Affair by Jean-Denis Bardin (translated from the French by Jeffrey Mehlman) is a fascinating account of an extraordinary legal case with insights into intelligence and security tradecraft as they were practiced in turn-of-the-century France. It is a detailed reconstruction of the case of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, accused and convicted as a spy for Germany and confined in solitary for more than five years on Devil's Island off French Guyana. Much of the book reads like a gripping espionage novel.

Although the Dreyfus case may be known to many Americans in some detail, others are familiar with it only from French history courses or from the 1930s Hollywood film which starred Paul Muni as Emile Zola, the most famous and most loyal of Dreyfus' many prominent defenders.

There is much to attract readers of nonfiction writings on intelligence in this book. It is rife with details of the tradecraft and internal politics of French military intelligence and security services in the 1890s when France expected war with Germany to develop at any time. But it is also a careful sociological study of the most insidious influence in French politics and society of the period—antisemitism—which was the cause of Dreyfus' ordeal.

The scion of a wealthy Alsatian Jewish mercantile family, Dreyfus had one abiding passion; he was a patriot who loved the French Army in which he served as an artillery officer specialist assigned to the General Staff. Confronted one morning in his office by his military superiors without warning and made to write out a brief statement about himself, Dreyfus was soon charged with treason on the basis of the alleged similarity of his handwriting to that of a suspected spy in the General Staff.

After a long trial in which he maintained his innocence, he was convicted of engaging in espionage for Germany. He was discharged from the army in disgrace in a public ceremony witnessed by his family. The conviction was based on evidence contrived by his antisemitic colleagues and superiors on the General Staff. They had prepared detailed false documents incriminating him as a secret agent of the German embassy in Paris and even provided the judges with further falsified secret evidence which was never surfaced in the court.

A high-living Hungarian-French officer, Colonel Esterhazy, the real traitor in the case, had left a letter addressed to the German military attache in Paris, for whom he was a paid secret agent, containing a list of French military documents from the General Staff that he could provide for a price. The letter subsequently reached the French counterintelligence service whose collection assets included the cleaning woman at the German embassy who regularly passed along everything she gleaned from the wastebaskets of the attaches (this was described in French service records as "coming from the usual channel").

Dreyfus' brother worked unceasingly for a retrial on the basis of clear evidence of gross misconduct of senior military officials and glaring irregularities in the trial proceedings. When after a few years the case appeared to be losing its appeal to the Paris press, his brother planted a story in the London

Book Reviews

press intended to revive public interest. The story alleged that Alfred's escape from Devil's Island was being planned by his supporters. Military headquarters in Paris thereupon sent an urgent cable to Dreyfus' jailers to reinforce his security immediately. His limited view of the sea from his solitary cell was promptly cut off and he was shackled to his bed. His correspondence to and from his wife was subjected to ever heavier censorship (he wrote only of his innocence, his suffering, his love of France, his family and the army, and eventually of his despair because of his failing health).

After a political storm slowly developed in France over the case when official duplicity was exposed, Dreyfus was returned to France for a retrial. After interminable legal proceedings that brought down several governments and led to several self-expatriations and suicides, he was found innocent and was reinstated in the army with his former rank. He was allowed to resign from the army for health reasons after a short period.

When France entered World War I Dreyfus volunteered for active service. He was wounded in combat after distinguished service. He died in retirement, not of the wound but of complications derived from his incarceration.

This case was not the finest hour in French military (or intelligence) history. Dreyfus suffered total ignominy because of the cynical complicity of politicians and senior military officers, including the head of military intelligence and his senior staff aides in a veritable orgy of antisemitism.

Bredin, the foremost living expert on the Dreyfus case, has compiled a brilliant history of legal and social developments in France in the period. The book is superbly annotated and expertly translated, with a monument to Dreyfus.

JOHN T. KIRBY